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As forecasters predicted the worst flooding in nearly 20 years, hundreds of volunteers filled the Warren Township High School parking lot in Gurnee Monday, helping fill sandbags to be carried by canoe or rowboat to submerged homes along the Des Plaines River.

"I'm just here because I figured if I needed help, I'd want people to help me, and I think they would," said Gurnee resident Tom LeBaron, whose home appeared safe for the moment.

The Des Plaines River in Gurnee is expected to crest later this week at a level nearly a foot higher than the 1986 flood that displaced more than 7,000 Lake County residents.

Still, state and local officials predict the damage won't be nearly so great this time, thanks to several flood-proofing projects, like new reservoirs and levees and a better-prepared deployment of sandbags and sump pumps.

The National Weather Service predicts the river will reach its peak in Gurnee around 1 a.m. Wednesday, when it will hit 12 feet, 7 inches.

The river is considered to be at flood stage when it reaches roughly 7 feet. The record high, set Sept. 27, 1986, was just under 12 feet.

Authorities believe the flood, at a minimum, will affect an area of Gurnee bounded by Route 21 on the west, Route 41 on the north, First Street on the east and Washington Street to the south.

That boundary, however, assumes no further rain either in Lake County or farther north near Kenosha, Wis., the river's source.

Both areas are expected to get more rain in coming days, so the affected area most likely will grow, Gurnee Fire Chief Fred Friedl said.

Communities farther to the south, including Lincolnshire, Libertyville and Des Plaines, also will be hit.

In Lincolnshire, the public works department distributed thousands of sandbags Sunday and Monday at Spring Lake Park for residents with homes along the river.

Libertyville officials are delivering sandbags to residents near Lake Minear. The Lake County Sheriff's inmate work-release program also is sending workers to help.

The area near the village golf course already is flooded.

"Overall, it's not too bad," said Kevin Bowens, Libertyville village administrator. "Having the golf course flooded is better than people's basements or yards."

In Des Plaines, flooding is expected to peak around 1 p.m. Thursday.

It's unclear if and when the area will be declared a federal disaster area, U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk said. That decision is left up to President Bush and probably wouldn't come until later this week.

As of Monday afternoon, eight families had been forced from their homes in Gurnee, Friedl said. One business also had its power shut off and was forced to close.

LeBaron, who lives just east of the intersection of O'Plaine Road and Grand Avenue, one of the areas hardest hit by the floods, said his home is "high and dry."

But like many volunteers, the 38-year-old Gurnee resident had a sense of déjà vu Monday.

LeBaron was working at Six Flags Great America at the time of the 1986 flood. Though he could practically see the park from his front yard, he had to drive north to Hwy 173 - about seven miles - to cross the river and continue south to work.

"Everything was under water," LeBaron recalled.

Countywide, that flood caused about \$100 million in damage, Kirk said.

This time around, residents and local officials had several advantages.

Fewer homes are standing in the flood plain. Reservoirs like Buffalo Creek in Buffalo Grove and Big Bend in Des Plaines now hold water that otherwise would be flooding the river's banks.

And while the 1986 flood came largely from one major downpour, this week's flooding was a work in progress spread out over several weeks of heavy rains that already have totaled more than three times the roughly 3 inches of normal rainfall for May.

As early as last week, Gurnee firefighters and city staff were visiting residents most likely to be affected by the floods.

On Friday, they set up "command central" at the high school. And Sunday morning, Metropolitan Emergency Support Services joined the American Red Cross and the Illinois Emergency Management Association in coordinating volunteers and providing them with food and shelter.

Although no one could put an exact number on the scores of volunteers, Metropolitan Emergency Support Services staff member Bonnie Long estimated her staff served lunch to more than 200 people Sunday.

The National Weather Service estimates the river won't return to its normal height until Saturday, at the earliest.

Until then, Long said, she and others will be on hand and ready to help.

"We're here for the duration," she added.

- Daily Herald staff writers Bob Susnjara and Sara Faiwell contributed to this report.

Worse: River to stay high at least until Saturday.